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DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM NI ELECTIONS

SUBJECT: ACF UNHAPPILY ACCEPTS THE ELECTIONS

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶1. (C) BEGIN SUMMARY: PolOffs met with Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) Chairman Chief Sunday Awoniyi at his Abuja residence on April 26. The Kaduna-based ACF is an umbrella organization advocating the political, economic, and cultural interests of the 19 states constituting northern Nigeria. While nonpartisan, the ACF has voiced strong criticism of Obasanjo's government and, in particular, his third term bid. Critical of the conduct of the April 14 and 21 polls, the ACF is concerned equally with the elections' outcome. Awoniyi said that the ACF would recognize, albeit grudgingly and "for the sake of democracy," Yar'Adua's administration. He advised opposition leaders Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar as well as disgruntled PDP members who have approached him to "exercise prudence" in their protest of the elections, noting that "violent protests would only beget more violence." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Chief Awoniyi appeared despondent and resigned over the conduct of the April 14 and 21 elections. He opined that the elections were "fraudulent" averring that the "government had no intention of holding anything approaching a free, fair, and credible" election. The greatest victims, he said, were the Nigerian electorate and the democratic process. While distrustful of Yar'Adua's close association to Obasanjo, the ACF will work with the new "President-select" for the "benefit of the democratic experiment in Nigeria," according to Chief Awoniyi. Emphatically, Awoniyi declared that on May 29, "Obasanjo must go) one way or another" and that "everything else would be sorted out later." (Note: In late 2006, Awoyini allegedly escaped an assassination attempt when burglars entered his Abuja home.)

¶3. (C) When asked about potential protests by opposition leaders Buhari and Atiku, Awoyini counseled that "while the opposition parties do not accept the outcome of the elections, they must be responsible in calming tensions" within their camps. He added that the "military and government will do what they like" to quash dissent. Awoyini expressed regret that the Nigerian government "failed to deliver on its promises to the people," instead "foisting a choice upon them."

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Chief Awoniyi, an aged Yoruba Christian from the North, served under Obasanjo (1976-1979) as Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum Resources and during Muhammadu Buhari's tenure as Federal Commissioner for Petroleum Resources. As one of the founding members of the PDP (his own dining table was used to draft the PDP manifesto), Awoniyi possesses intimate, though dated knowledge of Obasanjo and other prominent PDP elders. Retired politicians, military officers including Generals Ibrahim Babangida, Muhammadu Buhari, and Abdulsalami

Abubakar, businessmen, and traditional title holders from throughout the North formed the ACF in 2001 in order to regain the cohesion and prestige the North formerly enjoyed - regardless of ethnic, tribal, or religious affiliation. Power in Nigeria for so long was vested in the North, particularly through the leadership role the military had taken in directing the post-colonial affairs of the nation. In the minds of many northerners, the ascension of Obasanjo in 1999 and the emergence and dominance of the South in Nigerian politics served to further disenfranchise, if not wholly marginalize the northern elite. To be sure, similar attempts to recapture "northern pride" have emerged over the years; however, the ACF believes its mandate subsumes other, more partisan approaches. Many speculate that Awoniyi's appointment as ACF Chairman was designed to not only appeal to other Christians, many of whom perceive the North as exceedingly Muslim or Hausa-Fulani, but also to provide the ACF insight into Obasanjo and the PDP.

¶5. (C) COMMENT CONT'D: Over the past few weeks, we have heard members of the opposition voice strong criticism of the conduct and outcome of the April 14 and 21 polls. Buhari has stated publicly that he will not seek redress in the courts and that mass street protests are his only option. Awoniyi believes that the opposition is quickly losing momentum and lacks leadership and cohesion, but cautions that much remains to be seen in the lead up to May 29. END COMMENT.

CAMPBELL